

THE UFMCC BY-LAWS 1970 - 1981 : A SUMMARY OF THEIR DEVELOPMENT

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The By-Laws of the UFMCC originated through the By-Laws of the Metropolitan Community Church of Los Angeles, the first MCC congregation. For that reason the first set of Fellowship By-Laws focused much attention on the details of local church structure, and less on the Fellowship itself. The history of the UFMCC By-Laws is the history of the development from a very loose federation of local church groups governed by a Board of Elders and clearly led by MCC Los Angeles, to a bona fide denomination.

Much of the time, actual changes in informal Fellowship practice preceded By-Laws changes, and the By-Laws tried to keep up with this emerging denomination. This method of development was possible because of the "reservation of powers" given to local church option (Article XI), and because usually most of the Fellowship adhered to a "loose construction" approach to By-Laws interpretation: If it doesn't say you can't do it, then you can, or you can try!

Those original By-Laws were composed by a small committee chaired by the Rev. John Hose, Elder Emeritus. In the first several years, the By-Laws were revised at every yearly General Conference, usually from the floor of the conference. Gradually the Fellowship By-Laws Committee, under the capable leadership of Michael Mank, developed systems for prioritization of proposed By-Laws changes and ground rules for the sponsorship of such proposals (see notation at the conclusion of current By-Laws). The most important shift in recent years has been the leadership and initiative of the Commission on Government, Structures, and Systems, who have proposed orderly, congruent By-Laws changes emerging from "grassroots" concerns and suggestions. That commission was established in 1975, but did not become really viable until 1979, when it was restructured and given a clear mandate to revise Article IV (Ministry).

I would like to identify (somewhat tentatively!) the following trends in UFMCC By-Laws changes which reflect the developing denominational self-understanding of the people of UFMCC. (PLEASE NOTE: By "trends" I mean the general direction or movement. None of these trends has progressed without resistance, reversals, and struggle!)

- 1) Statement of Faith Trends: The changes in the Statement of Faith (originally contained in Article IV, and presently in Article III) merit a study all their own. In general, however, the language of our Statement of Faith has become more contemporary, ecumenical, and inclusive (especially with regard to gender). It has also benefitted from some technical, grammatical, and linguistic changes.
- 2) Rites and Sacraments Changes: Again, the trend has been to use more contemporary language and to reflect ecumenical sensibilities. This was especially dramatic when in 1973 the word "symbolize" was removed from the definition of Holy Communion, thus allowing UFMCC Holy Communion to be interpreted in any of the various Christian ways (transubstantiation, consubstantiation, memorial meal, etc.). Also the rites of the church have been refined through practice. One notable development, which appeared after the first year, was the rite of Holy Union, originally designed as the gay/lesbian counterpart to Holy Matrimony without the benefit of state sanction (although this intention is nowhere stated). Interestingly enough, MCC clergy have performed Holy Unions for heterosexual couples who wished to be united in a Christian covenant, but who did not wish to be legally married.



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3) Ministry Trends: I see three stages in the development of our understanding and articulation of ministry:

- a) An early overwhelming clergy identification, which included ordaining even elected officials, Elders, Deacons, Exhorters, and licensed clergy. Those were the days when everyone wore a collar and most of us were amateurs! This style came out of an uncritical acceptance of a hierarchical understanding of ministry. In addition, it is my personal opinion that there was a kind of neurotic need to "prove" we were a real church by looking like a real church (lots of collars, titles, trappings). This was not the case with all of us, by any means - but it is an observation about an undertone. The hunger for acceptance sometimes resulted in us doing imprudent things. End of sermon, except to say that this dynamic continues in MCC and will until oppression ceases to be internalized.
- b) With the emergence of so many new churches, there was a crying need for well-qualified clergy. Some of our early methods for choosing clergy were not working (!), and the Ministerial Credentials and Affairs Committee (MCAC, now known as Clergy Credentials and Concerns Committee or CCCC) and the Board of Elders began struggling with requirements and procedures for credentialing a "professional" clergy for UFMCC. Many applauded these efforts, and many did not. There was a lot of resistance, some from people who felt that creating an elite, "professional" clergy might simply be reinforcing hierarchical thinking, and others who resisted because people who were not academically qualified began to feel excluded from the possibility of being credentialed in UFMCC.. MCAC got most of the brunt of this resistance and was not always very popular! At the same time, the Fellowship did appear to be benefitting from a better prepared and trained clergy.
- c) Once the dust settled and our anxiety about having "credible" clergy eased some, the Fellowship had to really begin to re-think our understanding of ministry. This coincided with an emerging and powerful laity who challenged the Fellowship to see ministry as a partnership between laypeople and clergy. The culmination of this movement happened in 1981, when Article IV of the By-Laws underwent major revision, beginning with "The UFMCC affirms the universal priesthood of all believers." Moreover, the standards for credentialing clergy no longer were the domain of only other clergy. Now the General Conference itself must approve all standards and procedures for credentialing proposed by CCCC.

4) Government Trends: The government of the Fellowship has changed from one of "local church - General Conference - Elders" to an ever diversifying and, I think, decentralizing denominational structure. The earliest government was vested in the local church and Elders. Later, as the number of churches grew, the Elders became the focus of increasing centralization. Originally there were only four Elders, all male, all in Southern California, who once elected were simply going to have votes of confidence taken once every four years. That system did not last long. By 1973 there were seven Elders (including one woman), who were elected for three-year terms. In 1977 the four-year term was re-established. Gradually Commissions, Committees, and Boards began to become important in the leadership of the Fellowship. Also in 1971 the District structure was formally in place, and Districts continue to emerge as our intermediate political and programatic vehicle. By 1981 it was clearly the District Coordinators, Lay Representatives, and Church Extension representatives who were in key positions of leadership in the denomination. District representation to Commissions and working Fellowship groups became the method for testing ideas, change, and innovative programs at the "grass-roots" level.

One of the best examples of conflict and change in the arena of increasing democratization and enfranchisement in the Fellowship has been the make-up of the Board of Home Missions in each District. The earliest Board of Home Missions included only the pastors of Chartered Churches. But in those days there were no Study Groups, but only Missions, who did not remain Missions very long. Later the Lay Representative from that District to the Commission on the Laity also sat on the Board of Home Missions. Informally some Boards began having open meetings and inviting others to participate. Meanwhile the Study Group - Mission - Chartered Church structure was developed (1974-75). While this structure provided a process for becoming chartered and gave the Board of Home Missions more guidelines, it also served to disenfranchise those groups (even while mandating that they tithe to the Fellowship and District just as Chartered Churches do). Moreover, Missions and Study Groups did not have official membership or representation at District and General Conferences. They could not have deacons or student clergy (then called "exhorters"). This was partly due to an interpretation of the word "church" in the By-Laws as referring only to "Chartered Churches" and not to Missions and Study Groups. Gradually these problems have been (and are being) addressed. Missions and Study Groups may now have members, deacons, and student clergy. Worship Coordinators of Missions and Study Groups now have a seat and a vote on each District Board of Home Missions. Missions have a vote at District and General Conferences, and the Commission on Government, Structures, and Systems was asked by the 1981 General Conference to present to the 1983 General Conference a way for Study Groups to have voting representation at the 1983 Conference.

There is no question that democratization and lay participation go hand in hand. The development of a bi-cameral system of voting at conferences has gone a long way to empower laypeople (1973). One of the recent symbols of that was the election of the first lay person to the Board of Elders (Michael Mank in 1981). Another important move was the development of a lay/clergy Elders Nominating Committee (1977), which replaced an all-clergy nominating procedure.

The emphasis in the By-Laws on local church matters has actually decreased over the years, leaving more freedom for local church option. Gradually the Board of Deacons disappeared. Also the role definitions for the Pastor and Board of Directors were simplified and solidified.

Other important developments have included the increase in tithes to the Fellowship (from 5 to 10%), and the establishment of a 2% contribution for the District. This has been a result of investment in a denominational format. For a rationale for this format, see the UFMCC publication "Why We Are a Fellowship".

In summary, the story of the By-Laws tells much about the story of UFMCC and how we are changing. As we grow, we struggle to become more inclusive, more trusting of ourselves, more willing to trust a diversified and broad-based leadership that is in touch with the "grassroots", more open to a variety of ministries, and more ecumenical and creative in our faith and government. The struggle is not over!

